

Class and Culture and Identity: Introduction

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While there are exceptions, it is possible to relate culture and taste to social class.

Gans, 1974

No doubt that many of the old barriers of class should be broken down. However, at present the older, narrower but also more genuine class culture is being eroded in favour of mass opinion.

Hoggart, 1958

I started there in 1947 that is when I shared the platform with Arthur Horner.... The Durham's Miner's Gala is a fine occasion today, taking place as it does in that beautiful city; but in those days it was absolutely sensational. There were so many lodges, you see, and they had to start bringing them in at half past eight in the morning. The whole city absolutely throbbed with the thing from early in the morning, right through until you left. And you left absolutely drunk with it...the music, the banners, and all in that beautiful city. It overwhelmed you really. In those days it was, far and away, the best working class festival that there was in this country. Far and away the best. It was just marvellous.

Michael Foot, 1992

Presumably most groups gain some of their strength from their exclusiveness, from a sense of people outside, who are not 'us'. How does this express itself in working class people? I have emphasised the strength of home and neighbourhood, and have suggested that this strength arises partly from a feeling that the world outside is strange and often unhelpful, that it has the most of the counters stacked on its side, that to meet it on its own terms is difficult. One may call this, making use of a word commonly used by the working class the world of 'them'.

They are the people at the top, the 'higher ups', the people who give you dole, tell you to go to war, fine you, made this split the family in the thirties to avoid a reduction in the Means Test Allowance, 'get yer in the end', 'aren't really to be trusted', talk 'posh', are all twisters really.

Hoggart,

Introduction: Class and Culture

Twenty years ago, the American sociologist **Herbert Gans** argued that while there were always exceptions it was possible to **relate culture and taste to social class**. He pointed out (rather stereotypically) that most people from the **upper socio-economic** groups **liked classical music** and **most people from lower socio-economic groups did not**. Drawing the same kind of distinction between the culture of social classes today is more problematic. First **the mass media have now created the 'high culture'** of cultural elites **much more accessible to a wider audience**, so it is no longer an intellectual minority who enjoy opera. Secondly, the **relationship between culture and social class appears to vary widely around the world**. Samba for example, is regarded as music of the young working class within Brazil, while heavy rock is popular amongst the young, wealthy, and privileged strata of Brazilian society. Yet in Europe and North America, samba music is considered as an exotic form of world music popular with the educated elite's. Thirdly, and perhaps more significantly for sociology the debates over the changing nature of the class structure make the very concept of a 'class culture' problematic.

There are several ways of defining the differences between social classes in sociology. However, even here there is disagreement amongst sociologists. What do we mean by 'working class' or 'middle-class culture'? Yet, in our daily lives we do still recognise cultural signals - in terms of language, fashion, shopping, and even TV viewing - which tell us about the class background of the people we meet.

Most people would agree that few societies are equal. The study of **social stratification** is of central concern to sociologists because modern societies display such a **wide range of inequalities**. These inequalities between **rich and poor**, between **social classes**, between **men and women**, and **black and white**. Inequalities exist in a wide range of areas of social life, such as **job security, leisure opportunities, health, housing, income**, and the power to influence events in society.

What is Stratification?

The word **stratification** comes from *strata* or (layers), as in the way different rock are piled on top of one another to form rock strata. **Social Stratification** refers to the divisions of society into a pattern of layers or strata made up of a hierarchy of social groups. **Beteille** notes social inequalities have existed even among small tribes.

These stand in relation to **advantage** and **disadvantage** to one another in terms of features such as income, wealth occupation, race or sex, depending upon the stratification system. Those at the top of the stratification hierarchy will generally have more power than those at the bottom.

Sociologists argue that some form of social stratification **occurs in every society in the world**, despite the fact that people have always dreamt of a society where everyone is equal. All societies appear to distinguish between people and become more or less important than others.

Exercise One

Introduction to Stratification

A nuclear bomb has been tracked by NATO is ten minutes away from obliterating the earth. You are in the local council's bomb shelter with 14 others who were nearby when the alarm was sounded. In the shelter there is only enough food for **eight** (whatever their age), **and so seven people must go outside to die**. You have been chosen to make the decision about who is to leave and who is to stay.

Get into small groups and try to reach a **unanimous verdict** on who is to be **allowed to remain** and later form part of a new society. Choose **one of your group** to write **down your decisions** and on **what basis you made them...**

Here are the occupants of your shelter. The table below contains the information you have about them.... When you have reached your decision discuss your results with the rest of the group.

Occupation	Sex	Age
1. Computer Programmer	Male	37
2. Baby	Female	6months
3. Agricultural Labourer	Male	45
4. MP	Male	40
5. Teenager still at school	Male	14
6. Minister of Religion	Male	67
7. IRA suspected Terrorist	Female	28
8. Teacher of Sociology	Female	30
9. David Beckham	Male	22
10. Housewife	Female	25
11. Her husband	Male	27
12. Laboratory Technician	Male	50
13. Schoolgirl	Female	8
14. Famous Author	Male	56

These inequalities can be divided into 3 main groups....

1. **Economic Privilege**, some have greater access to others to economic resources such as money.
2. **Social Prestige**, some personal or social qualities are valued more highly than others.
3. **Power**, some positions in society are more powerful than others.

Differences in Stratification

Groups may be stratified in of course different ways.

Exercise Two

List as many ways as possible that groups can be stratified including examples from around the world.

Working Class Culture in the UK

The Changing working-class? The Work of Richard Hoggart, CCCS, Birmingham Univ

In the 1950's it became fashionable to argue that **rising living standards were changing the nature of working class culture**. **Zweig, 1961** argued that a **new affluent worker (Goldthorpe)** was emerging whom **was becoming middle class in lifestyle and political attitudes**. Certainly, sections of the working class enjoyed access to a range of cultural goods and commodities for the first time, including family cars, washing machines, TV's and holiday's abroad. **Richard Hoggart**, for example, saw the arrival in the UK of American cultural products, rock and roll, juke boxes, American movies, etc. – **as part of the creation of a mass society in which rich and important traditions of working class culture were being washed away**. Hoggart himself came from a working class background. In *The Uses of Literacy*, he devotes the first half of the book to detailing the richness and vitality of pre-war culture in the homes, churches, pubs and other organisations of the working class communities. **Young and Willmott** for example observed in *Family and Kinship in East London, 1957* that whereas kin more easily out of each others homes, acquaintances and even friends meet routinely on the streets. **Philip Cohen** explains the dynamics of the street community very much in terms of **Young and Willmott**, Cohen's comments about the self-policing of the streets is particularly interesting in the light of current more apprehensive perceptions.

Sexism in Working Class Culture

The culture and the community **were heavily gendered**. Married women and their infants 'occupied' the homes and streets during the day and men and youth took them over during evening and night. However, only the youngsters used them specifically as a leisure space. At home their was heavy separation between males and females, whilst this separation was continued in the pub, where taking the spouse was 'an occasional treat'.

Traditional Working Class Values: Good will Humanism

Working class people faced a life of **permanent insecurity**, never being sure that their jobs would last or their rented housing would be permanent. Accordingly, working class culture emphasised a **certain frivolity** – living for the moment rather than planning, and taking fun while the chance was there. Nevertheless, Hoggart insists, traditional **working class culture also stood for certain values** which he strongly approved of; a **sense of responsibility for others in the community**, tolerance, a 'good will humanism', a **commitment to political involvement**, and **sense of decency or knowing right from wrong**. This led to a closely-knit community, with a strong sense of belonging, and of exclusion in terms of both place and people. (See quote at top of handout)

Mass Culture; the End of the Working Class?

In the second half of his book, **Hoggart** describes the ways in which he **feared traditional working-class culture was being eroded by the arrival of mass entertainment designed to appeal to all classes**. Radio for example, made it no longer necessary for working class people to meet together and sing their own songs. Hoggart felt that something was being lost...

Some 40 years on, Hoggart considers that the erosion of working class culture he detected in the 1950's has gone a **stage further**. He has become less sure of the common-sense capacity of the working class to detect 'tripe' – of which in his view there is a lot. He is unimpressed by **Post Modernists** attempt to embrace popular culture – the less so because they do it in such incomprehensible language!

Criticisms of Hoggart's Rosy View of the Working Class

Critics of Hoggart have pointed to the **nostalgic flavour of his account of pre-war working class culture** and his inclination to **ignore the tougher and more brutal aspects of living in such communities**, according to **Jenks** to the pint of sentimentality. Perhaps a more important criticism is that, while Hoggart stressed the inventiveness of pre-war working class culture, he fails to recognise that **exactly the same process might be at work 20 years later in the reaction of working-class people to commercial or mass culture**. In other words, rather than passively absorbing a 'poorer', 'classless' commercial culture, working class people might still be adapting and using the 'bits' of the commercial culture to create new equally rich forms of working class culture.

Limitations of Using Stratification

Introduction to Stratification

Sociologists have often made use of the ideas derived from other sciences - the so-called 'organic analogy' in which human societies are likened to living organisms is the best known example. Nevertheless, such parallels are always limited and can be misleading. In the case of stratification metaphor, for example, it is obvious that the **arrangements of different social groups in society** are not really like the **arrangements of rock in the crust of the earth**. Geological strata **do not interact with one another**, for example, whereas even in even the most rigid and hierarchical of societies there is some degree of interaction between groups at the top and those at the bottom. Similarly, different geological layers **cannot change place relative to one another whereas in human societies**, one group may 'rise' in power and status over time while another may 'fall'. Fifty years ago in Britain for example, clerks were undoubtedly more highly esteemed than they are today. Similarly in the USA, it is possible to observe the 'rise' in status of different ethnic groups such as Italians or the Poles who previously occupied very lowly positions in the class system as recent immigrants to that society. And in many Western societies, the position of women relative to that of men has been changing somewhat over the last 20 years.

Not only do social groups rise and fall relative to one another, but so too do individual members of these groups, One of the main problems with employing such a metaphor of stratification within sociology is precisely that it cannot capture the idea of individual movement between layers.

Exercise Three

For each of the following societies try to decide if there is any **one characteristic**

- age
- class
- gender
- ethnicity
- nationality
- religion
- etc.

In shaping people's life chances....

1. Northern Ireland
2. The Old Soviet Union
3. Israel
4. The Deep South of the USA
5. The Old South Africa
6. Rural Provinces of India

Resources Used

Sociology A Modular Approach: **Denis Gleeson**

Social Class and Stratification: **Peter Saunders, Society Now Series**

Sociology in Focus: **Taylor et al**

An Introduction to Sociology: **Ken Browne**

Sociology in Perspective: **Mark Kirby et al**

Introduction to Sociology: **Mike O'Donnell.**

Exercise Four

Try to rank each of the following characteristics in terms of their importance in shaping economic inequalities in contemporary Britain...

- ❖ the job people do
- ❖ their gender
- ❖ their ethnic identity
- ❖ the family they were born into
- ❖ the region of the country they live in
- ❖ their religious affiliation
- ❖ How old they are...

Exercise Five

Look at the following statements relate them to the working class or middle class....

1. Public schools such as Eton.
2. Factories near houses.
3. Symmetrical conjugal roles.
4. Nuclear families with no close knit to family members.
5. Going doing to the pub with male members of the family while the wife prepares Sunday Lunch.
6. The local Comprehensive.
7. A close-knit world
8. Segregated conjugal roles

Other Systems

The Caste System

The caste system is found in **India** and elsewhere in **Asia** where people are typically divided into five main strata...

- Brahmins (Priests and nobles)
- Kshatriyas or Rajputs (warriors and rulers, and landowners)
- Vaishyas (merchants, traders, farmers)
- Shudras (servants, labourers, manual workers)
- the outcaste group, the untouchables, these are thought to be impure, they do jobs such as dealing with sewage, cutting up dead animals and washing dirty clothes)

The four caste groups are subdivided into **occupational groups** called **Jatis**, which determine the kind of work each individual, can do. The caste people **are born into** therefore determines all aspects of your life. It affects individuals life-styles, which they can marry, eat with, or visit as well as the job they can do.

The caste system is a **very rigid system of stratification**. This means there is **little chance of social mobility** up or down. Status is **ascribed it is given a birth**, unlike achieved status which can be altered by success or failure.

Although this system was officially abolished in 1949 when India became independent, it continues to exist. It is still **very strong** because it is based upon the **teachings of the Hindu religion**. The Hindu doctrine of *Karma* states that your **caste in this life is determined by your actions in a previous existence**. A good life is rewarded by a high caste, a bad life punished by future untouchability. A good road sweeper can be reincarnated next time into the Brahmin and hence to eventually achieve Nirvana (enlightenment, becoming one with the universe), so escaping the eternal cycle of suffering and rebirth.

It is therefore part of the economic, the social system and religious system of the country and is thus difficult to break down.

Exercise Six

Similarities to UK Class system to Indian Caste System	Differences Between the Two Systems

Feudalism

The Feudal system of medieval Europe existed of three estates...

1. nobles
2. clergy
3. commoners (freemen)

Each of the above had **defined rights and duties**. The positions were largely **hereditary** (with the exception of the clergy) and so there **was little movement between the classes**. Feudalism was largely organised mainly around the **ownership of agricultural land** (even the clergy derived most of their income from the land). The serfs who worked the land were not; strictly speaking, an estate but they too were bound into a system of mutual obligations. They gave ‘economic tribute’ (livestock, grain, eggs, military and other services to the noble landowners that allowed them to farm the land. The landed nobles exercised control over their respective territories in return they owed there tenants certain duties (protect them from rival nobles. The nobles owed ultimate allegiance to the monarch but sometimes-local lords enter rival alliances.

Other Forms of System

- ✓ Slavery, free and unfree slaves obtained either from conquest or purchase
- ✓ Class in capitalist Society: people’s positions in the market determine their social ranking.

Exercise Seven

Describe the type of people who would choose the following drink at a pub. What are their ages, sex, and class.

Introduction to Stratification

Drink	Age	Sex	Class
A champagne Cocktail			
A pint of bitter			
A Gin and Tonic			
Half a Lager and Lime			
A double Whisky			
A Mackeson			
Perrier Water			
A glass of white wine			
A dry Martini -shaken not stirred!			
Half of Cider			